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If I Knew Then What I Know Now: Finding Inspirations for Literacy Where We Least Expect It

by Christina Berchini

“They think they’re all going to be basketball stars.”

Mr. Antolini,³ an eighth-grade English teacher, lamented to me as he shuffled through student papers littered with red, critical ink. I was a guest in his racially and culturally diverse classroom, where he allowed me to collect data for my dissertation. On this day, they had just finished reading a short story from a *Common Core*-aligned textbook; to put it plainly, students weren’t having it.

Mr. Antolini was one of my former teacher education students at a large, Midwestern university renowned for its secondary education program. Because I had been his sole instructor for two years’ worth of English education coursework, I knew Mr. Antolini well. He was comfortable sharing his frustrations with me. He trusted me to help him as best I could.

Mr. Antolini’s comment represents a tale as old as time: That of a teacher struggling to build a solid bridge between traditional, school-based literacies and the realities of a multi-modal world; the bridge between narrow understandings about what it means to be literate, and students with other ideas.

Furthermore, Mr. Antolini’s lamentation represents another struggle: That of failing to identify how students’ extra-curricular investments represent rich, literate practices. Mr. Antolini’s students were deeply invested in sports. I saw firsthand how it was all they talked about; for them, engaging in sports was the best use of their time.

I had such a student, back when I taught English Language Arts at a Title I school in central New Jersey. Mr. Antolini’s struggle inspires me to share the story of Jason:

A slight 12-year-old boy, Jason had olive skin and deep dimples, mischievous brown eyes, and a personality that made up for whatever his short stature couldn’t accomplish. I enjoyed Jason immensely and noticed immediately that he was one of our school’s more popular students. He did not always do his homework, and he did not always pass his exams. In truth, he did not attend school regularly, but when he did, he contributed to our class discussions about novels and current events and other topics in interesting and powerful ways—often diverting the conversation to his first love: Basketball.

I felt—we all felt—Jason’s absence when he was not in class.

His basketball skills rendered him something of a celebrity in our small school community. It was almost comical; one might think that his below-average height would have dictated his basketball skills, but his talent on the court immediately silenced his naysayers. He was always the first to be selected as a teammate for games. Jason was good at the sport, and he knew it. His facial expression

³ All names in this essay are pseudonyms.

exuded two-parts smug, one-part proud after he was selected for a team before all the other kids, time and time again (see Berchini 2016 for a longer narrative about Jason).⁴

Despite Jason's clear love of sports, I did not capitalize on this opportunity to tailor my curriculum to him and students like him. My students and I forged ahead, business as usual, enjoying Jason's occasional sports-related anecdote without considering how to make substantive use of it for the benefit of him and his peers.

I wonder, sometimes, the difference I might have made for Jason and others if I did better to put into practice the subtle ways by which students have pled with me to make use of their extra-curricular investments. Alan Brown describes this practice as a "method for connecting adolescents, sports, and literature" (Brown). Specifically, Brown encourages literacy teachers to consider the ways that "social activities and sports-related young adult literature [give] students...an opportunity to explore the world around them, including academic objectives and social pressures that are part of the transition to high school." Brown has put into practice what he preaches, by way of a weekly book club with only three guiding principles: Talk sports, eat free snacks, and read good books.

In considering my own work, what if I had secured a class set of Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover* – a story about twins revered for their talent on their middle school's basketball court. *The Crossover* is, by far, not the only option for sports lovers. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, authored by Sherman Alexie, is another—highly regarded and award-winning story—about a young boy who struggles in school and falls back on his basketball prowess to make friends. Like any good book, both novels delve into complex and even heart-wrenching issues involving identity, relationships, and life, therefore resolving any misguided questions about "text complexity." More important than "text complexity," books such as these have the potential to reach students uninspired by stagnant literature curricula.

To that end, what if novels such as *The Crossover* and *The Absolutely True Diary* earned a permanent place in middle school English curriculum as easily and unquestioningly as "the classics"? What if one of my (many) negotiations with students involved researching sports-related literature possibilities and then petitioning our principal and school board to secure a class set? This task would hit at several academic requirements in authentic ways: Researching, reading, analyzing, argumentative and persuasive writing, and possibly speech and presentation—and this is just a starting point. Such a project, I argue, is profoundly more effective and memorable than anything reproduced out of a state-testing practice book.

I continue to merge the stories of Jason, Mr. Antolini, and my own pedagogical ineptitude with my preservice English teachers—a group of education majors with fairly narrow understandings about literacy and what it means to teach it and learn it, a narrowness due in no small part to coming up under the Common Core Standards and punitive state expectations for enforcing them. I am explicit about my goal in sharing their stories, and impart to my students what I wish I had known, as a new English teacher struggling to build bridges of literacy and meaning-making. Like Alan Brown, I have one simple principle for our semester-long work together: Find inspirations for literacy where you least expect it.

⁴This piece has been nominated by [Empty Sink Publishing](#) for a [Pushcart Prize](#).

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